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# IFAS EXTENSION

## Friday's Feature

By

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April 8, 2006

### Stroll through the garden with walking iris

One of the most beautiful blooms of spring comes from the walking iris. This plant has several common names. Botanically, it's known as *Neomarica gracilis*, and is a member of the Iris family.

It's called walking iris because of its habit of propagating itself by producing plantlets that form at the tips of the flower stalk. When the new plantlet is formed, it inevitably bends to the ground and takes root. This new plant then repeats the process. Thus, the walking iris "walks" through the garden.

The sword-shaped leaves grow in the form of a fan, hence another of its common names, the fan iris. And because there are usually twelve leaves in a fan it is also called the twelve apostles plant. And once you see the bloom of the walking iris, you will appreciate another of its common names--the poor man's orchid.

The exotic-looking, delicate flowers appear in spring and resemble a cross between an orchid and an iris. Although they are short lived, lasting only a day, others follow over an extended period. The pure white outer petals spread out almost horizontally and have unusual yellow and mahogany markings at their base. The three central petals are shorter, have a distinct curl and are blue with mahogany colored bands.



Other species of *Neomarica* provide flowers of different colors. *N. longifolia* has yellow blooms with mahogany splotches on the petals. *N. caerulea* has light blue petals with brown, yellow and white markings.

Walking iris is a clumping herbaceous perennial that reaches a height of 18 to 36 inches. It is hardy in zone 10 but has survived in my zone 8 garden, in the ground, for several years. In protected areas it remains evergreen. In more open areas, it will show signs of cold damage. In harsh winters, this plant will have to be protected or it will freeze back.

Place walking iris in an area that receives partial to full shade. It is tolerant of a wide range of moist, but drained, soils. It is best to err on the wet side since it will not endure drought conditions. It has low to no salt tolerance.



Walking iris is a very versatile plant. They are quite lovely when massed together and can be used as a taller groundcover in the shade. They can be used in borders, beds or container plantings. A large hanging basket makes an ideal home for this plant.

Walking iris is very easy to propagate by division. Simply divide an existing clump or detach a new, rooted plantlet from the mother plant.

This plant is somewhat available in nurseries, but usually not widely sold. Most gardeners depend on getting a start from a friend, making this a popular pass-along plant.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>